

Sermon

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Charleston, SC

10:30 am Chapel Sermon ~ 1 Kings 3:3-14, Matthew 7:7-11

OK, If God Already Knows Everything, Why Pray?

The Rev. Ted McNabb

Solomon prays for the gift of wisdom and Jesus says ...*Ask, seek, knock....and see how much more*. These are the key words our two lessons give us this morning and that guide us toward the subject of prayer. So let's get started with the question I'm using as the title of my sermon.

"OK, if God Already Knows Everything, Why Pray?"

On the surface it seems to be a reasonable question: if God is omniscient, sees everything, isn't anything we pray superfluous, redundant, and in other words totally unnecessary? Why bother with prayer at all?

Let me try to deal with this in short order by saying that the purpose of prayer has nothing to do whatsoever with volunteering information to God. At the true heart of prayer what we are volunteering in prayer is simply our *selves*.

OK, yes, in prayer we seek help in dealing with our limitations, whatever they might be. We want help with a job situation. We seek help with our marriage and parenting issues. We need help with health concerns. These are all valid subjects to put before God. But if we are not careful prayer can be reduced to the hope of hitching God to whatever wagon in our life needs pull'n at the moment. But the Gospel of Jesus goes deeper than seeking a power to help us with the practicalities of our life. The Gospel always comes with a holy heartbeat. It's irrevocably personal. And the essence of prayer, therefore, is neither practical nor informational but always relational.

Let me tell you a story from my own life. The truth of what I've just said was powerfully pressed into me years ago when the Holy Spirit pretty much "blew my doors off" in November of 1971. It was for me a rather dramatic "Paul on the Damascus Road" type thing but this morning I want to bypass any kind of sensational description of what happened to me that evening and instead simply share with you that in those moments I was drawn into an overwhelming awareness of being fully "known" (inside and out) by the Person of God. I found myself overwhelmed by absolute intimacy.

Imagine you've had the portrait of someone you've never met hung in the front hallway of your house...perhaps even gathering a bit of dust along the top of the picture frame. Every now and then you take an appreciative glance at it, but for the most part you kind of take it for granted. The portrait has become part of the furniture in the place you call home.

Then there is a knock at the door and you think it's probably the FedEx guy delivering something from Amazon. But when you open the door you find yourself being encountered by a very real Someone who walks past his portrait on the wall on the way to your living room. And within that moment the sense of "being known" fully, intimately, inside and out by The Holy Person who has just entered your living quarters....that sense of truly "being known" ...is immediate and absolute.

One reason I'm sharing this little snapshot of my life this morning is because I know it's easy for someone else to think "well...you lucky dog, at least for you after that there's no need for religious questions anymore!!" It was not so. Quite the contrary. As I sat alone in my college dorm that evening I suddenly felt I had complete permission for any and every question in my heart to surface and come out like Adam and Eve from behind the hiding places of guilt and fear of embarrassment where I had privately kept them.

The Person who had entered my front door and sat down in my living room was indicating to my heart that we had plenty of time. Ask away ...from the heart. Let 'er rip, Ted. My most fearful questions. My most embarrassing doubts. We had world enough and time to work on these together. So I started asking and for 48 years we've been walking out a response.

Remember when the Lord once told his disciples, "when the Holy Spirit comes, He will lead you into all truth." Notice he did not say "He will reveal all truth" the way someone can open the shades in a dark room. He said "lead you into." The Holy Spirit will companion you on a personal pilgrimage into all truth concerning an on-going relationship with the Living God... step by step, day by day.

Transforming Hearts Through Jesus Christ

Knock, Ask. Seek...seek first the Person.

But now I want to turn to the punchline verse from our Gospel from Matthew this morning: *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!* This is from Matthew. Let me tack onto this the way Luke's Gospel put it: Luke 11:13 *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

If you put both of these together you have various and countless gifts that are from the Holy Spirit all of which grow out of the primary gift of The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one primary gift promised by Jesus to any and all disciples of his. Seek first The Person. Seek first the relationship. Because it's in a constantly developing relationship through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ that we are to be led into all the ways the Lord calls us to use any and every other gift he will give to us.

So let's talk about gifts for a minute. Let me suggest there's no such thing as a strictly individual gift. All gifts are meant for everybody. The only reason you or I have any gifts is so we can give them!

It's why we tell stories. It's why we dare to witness out of our own life experience. Something special given to me or you doesn't set us above anyone any more than Israel being The Chosen People made them anymore precious in God's eyes than any baby ever born to parents not belonging to the Covenant Community of Israel. Israel was chosen not to boast a special privilege for themselves but to serve a holy purpose meant for everybody.

Therefore, if at a Day Of Healing Prayer there is someone who has an experience of healing that is dramatic enough to want to put up on a billboard on I-26. The message and the story of that healing is meant to bless us all. It's a blessed holy signpost meant to speak to, beckon, call, and encourage ... to reach outward to the whole world and say over and over and over again

– “come unto Me all who are weary from the weight of pain that comes and accumulates with living as a broken person in a broken world... *and I will give you recovery and renewal. I will lead you ...lead you into restoration...lead you into the true joyful relational intimacy for which you have been made and is why you exist.*

Don't take for granted but know how wonderful it is to be in a worshipping community like St. Michael's where stories of the Holy Spirit are so richly given. We get to stand here in this very room and hear Tom Acker tell us about the little girl in India born blind whom the Lord healed and thereby used as a megaphone to speak of His presence, and his truth, and his love to every single person who gets to hear the story.

And just as a quick sidebar note: many more people are in possession of stories that are not told or that we don't get to hear. This is one reason why we have come to believe Life Groups at St. Michael's can be so important in our pilgrimage towards spiritual maturity with the Holy Spirit. They can become safe places to tell not just the occasional big stories but dare to offer the more frequent and humble little stories of the work of the Holy Spirit in the step-by-step pilgrimage we share.

So, back to knock, ask, seek...seek the God who delights in saying “how much more!”

If we who are messed up to the point where all our children are going to need therapy when they are in their 30's (!) ...if we, just as we are, delight to see the joy on the faces of our children and grandchildren when we are able to give them something that delights them... How much more does the Heavenly father “delight to give you the Kingdom” (as Jesus tells us in Luke 12:32), how much more will the heavenly Father give the one great gift promised by the Risen Jesus...how much more will the Heavenly Father give the gift Holy Spirit to those who ask him for it.

So, ask, knock, seek ...but now I must askto what purpose? I want to offer you a two part reply this morning to this question. And I would say that part II is meant to grow like fruit naturally out of Part I.

And I have to stop at this point and say that when I wrote this preaching and teaching this week I looked back and saw I had written much more than I have time to say. So in terms of the subject of “purpose” I'm going to hit Part I pretty hard and then try to leave us with what I hope is basic theological guidance for Part II.

As I learned that evening the Holy Spirit came through the door of my life, walked past the portrait of Jesus hung in the entrance hallway, and moved into and sat down in the living room of my heart... the first purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit is very simple ...as simple as the needs of any child ever born into this life. The purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit was to let me know that I am unique but not alone... to let us know that

we are known...to know that you are known...intimately... thoroughly, historically, completely, inside and out. And as Al likes to say, “Here's the kicker” to know that you are known...and ...loved...loved as you are known.

This is the deepest need of every child. We are all born into brokenness, but none of us are born for brokenness. Embedded within the spiritual DNA of every single person is our deep need to be known... intimately...and loved as we are known.

Perhaps this is why Jesus at one point puts a child on his lap and say, “*Look, there is a child inside every heart that hungers to be known and loved as they are known. This powerfully intimate love is the constant living reality of the entire Kingdom of God. I'm offering the hungry child that at this moment is alive in the deepest core of your heart this gift. And you must not allow your pride or your guilt or your fear or whatever ...you must not prevent the child of your heart from rising up within you and coming with open arms to receive this gift of being known...personally, thoroughly, intimately ...and loved.*”

Personally known. Personally loved. This is part I of the purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is simple, intimate, child-like. *Come unto me....*

And out of this grows Part II of the purpose of the powerful Gift of the Holy Spirit.

I think the best way to get into this is to simply ask you to pay attention to the use of power in the life of Jesus. Jesus at every turn submitted power. Every step of the way in the life of Jesus power was in total submission to God's Holy Purpose. The key verb...the key *action word* that attaches the Gospel to the word “power” is “submit.” I want to give you a quick teaching I included in my sermon a few Sundays ago over in the church. It's also a teaching I use in all my pre-wedding counselling and at every wedding rehearsal.

The word “submit” comes from two Latin words: sub mittere. Sub = *under* and mittere = *to send*. To submit...to send underneath.

In the world the word *submit* is typically used to mean to raise the white flag and passively accept that you have been overpowered. “You...submit to my will You are under my thumb!” But embedded within the action of living out a Kingdom life the word submit is not concerned with passive powerless resignation, but instead it casts a vision for the proactive use of power for an intended purpose. To send ...to move out...to act and place power underneath people in order to lift them up...to raise them up...to benefit, to strengthen, to serve a legitimate need out of whatever capacity you have to apply to that legitimate need....and, ultimately, to lift hearts...to lift them to the Lord.

The intent of all love, therefore, is to submit all power to every purpose of God. Jesus is the true king of this love. And this the kind of motive we see operating when Solomon asks God for wisdom for his people instead of selfishly attempting to treat God like the genie in Aladdin's lamp.

No...: Power and Gifts sent underneath with the intent and motive of lifting up: This is what it looks like to follow in the footsteps of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So for this, my friends,... Ask, seek, knock... And see how much more the Father delights to give you ... give you the power to love powerfully because you have come to know in the living room of your heart how deeply and powerfully you are loved.